

The RETURN TO PELLUCIDAR by EDGAR RICE BURROUGHS

VOLUME 16
NUMBER 2

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KIDNAPED INTO THE FUTURE

By WILLIAM P. McGIVERN

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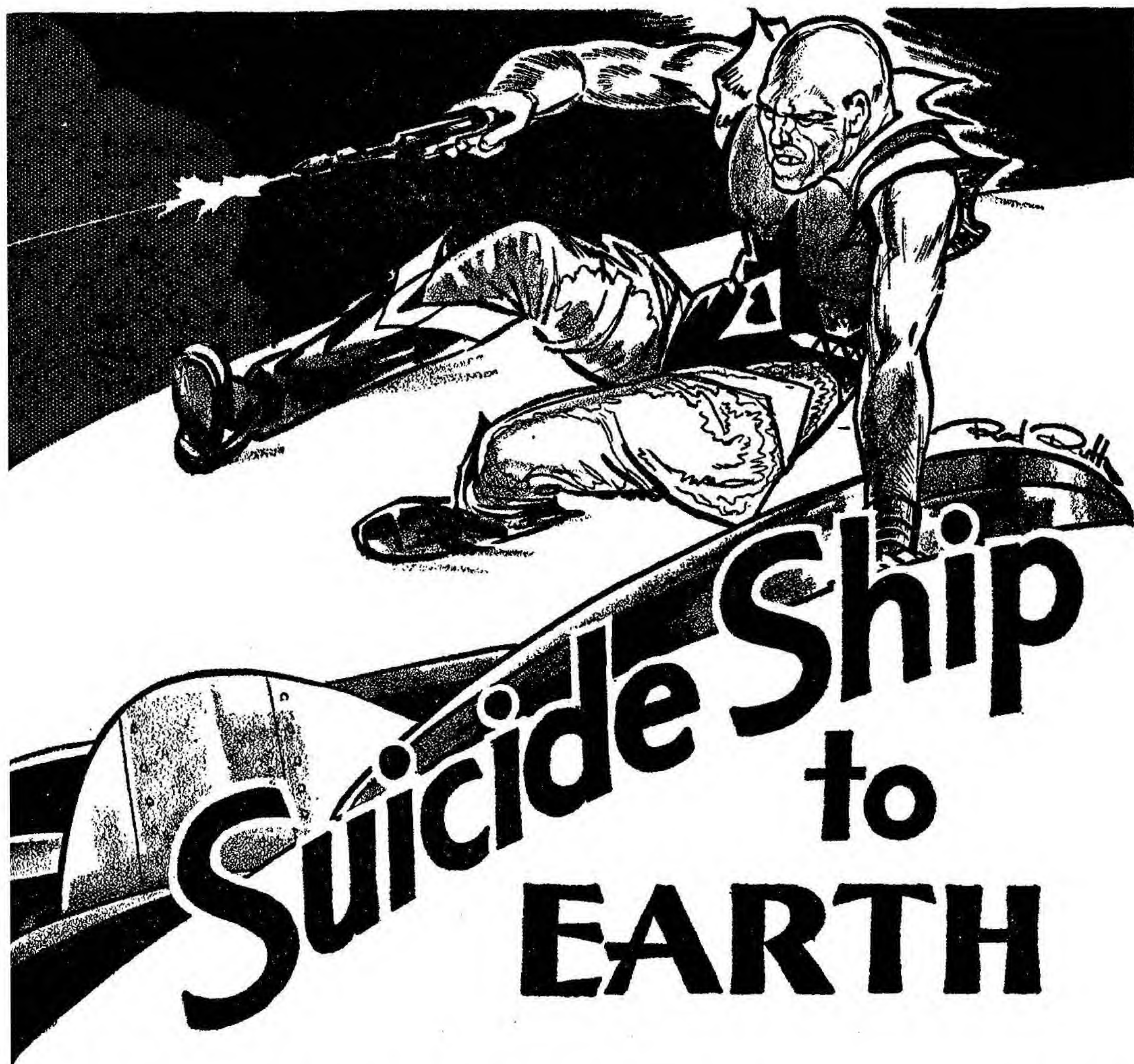
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Volume 16
Number 2



The Martian's shot whipped past Wade's head



The owners of the *Princess* had no intention of making port with her—but forgot to tell Tom Wade

by DUNCAN FARNSWORTH

STANDING there on the space wharf, First Rocketeer Tommy Wade clinked the two Martian *klekas* in his pocket against each other and gazed resignedly down at the miserable hulk which was to be his problem child for the next thirty days.

"Hell," Wade muttered, "I suppose I'm lucky even to have a berth like this."

She was named *S.S. Princess*, and

was as ancient and as generally decrepit an old tub as he had ever seen masquerading under the guise of a space freighter in all his ten years of void voyaging.

Wade sighed, tilting his frayed space officer's cap back on his thatch of straw colored hair. His face was youthful and rugged in spite of the gaunt hollows in his cheeks which were the result of very slim eating in the past few months.

Then he grinned, teeth white against the space bronze of his skin, starting down the duralloy planks that led to the slip where the *Princess* was moored.

There was an oiler, sunning himself against the rusty deck rail of the squalid space ship, and he looked sleepily disinterested as Wade approached.

"Hey there, Mister," Wade shouted. "Can you tell me where I'll find the master of this, uh, freighter?"

The oiler blinked his eyes for an instant, watching Wade traverse the gangplank to the worn deck. Then, spitting over the side, he jerked his right arm and thumb wordlessly over his shoulder.

Wade saw the dingy Master's cabin which the oiler had indicated. The door was slightly ajar. He took a deep breath and stepped over to it, rapping once on its rusty surface.

"Come in, come in!" a voice thundered.

Wade stepped across the threshold. He saw an undershirted, red-faced, white-haired old man sitting behind a paper-littered desk on which rested a bottle and two glasses. The red-faced old fellow weighed at least two hundred pounds, and Wade was certain that he couldn't be taller than five-six. His nose looked like a big puffed wart.

"You're Captain Toby?" Wade asked.

"And who else might I be?" The undershirted old man sighed and leaned back in his chair, his button eyes obviously sizing up his visitor.

"I'm Wade," Tommy declared. "Your new first rocketeer. Your owners told you to expect me, I hope."

The old captain sat forward. "And would you be having your papers along?" he asked.

Wade nodded, reaching into his frayed white tunic pocket and pulling

forth a sheaf. He handed them to the captain. Then, from another pocket, he pulled out a square card.

"And here's my ticket," Wade added. Captain Toby took it, and sat back again in his chair, eyes flickering over the papers. After a minute he looked up.

"Like as not they're all right," he rasped. "But I'll warn you now, Mister, we'll be expecting a miracle man as well as a first rocketeer. You'll need to be knowing your rockets to move this tub."

Wade thought for an instant of the two lonely *klekas* in his pocket, then said: "I'm just the First to keep them running."

Old Captain Toby smiled wryly.

"That's what I'm liking about youth," he sighed, "plenty of optimism." His button eyes regarded Wade for an instant. "I was optimistic once. But, of course, I was as young as you are, then."

Wade grinned back.

"Shall I sign the ship's papers, now, sir?"

Captain Toby fished into a lower drawer of his dirty desk, finally bringing forth a much worn ledger.

"All right, Mister Wade, you'll be signing at the top there, and the bargain's cinched."

For one last instant, Wade hesitated. Then he took the pen and bent over the ledger . . .

IT WAS LATE afternoon when Wade, grease stained and sweaty, reported to Captain Toby on the bridge of the tramp space freighter. Working only on side rocket power, they had managed to snort and bank their way erratically out into space shortly before noon. But that had only been with the help of some prodigious coaxing of the rocket motors during the better part of

the morning.

Captain Toby was busy with a pencil over a bridge chart, and he looked up as Wade spoke.

"Captain," Wade blurted, "I've done my damndest, sir, and I still can't get those blankety-blank portside rockets hitting straight."

"You wouldn't be losing some of that youthful enthusiasm, now would you?" Captain Toby asked solemnly.

"But we're working only under starboard power," Wade protested, crimsoning. "If we're too long on those ancient tubes, this whole damned packet is going to blow up in our faces!"

Captain Toby pushed his visored cap back on his forehead and put his pudgy fists on the chart table. He looked up at Wade soberly. "Look now, lad," he said. "I know you've not the easiest task in the cosmos down there, but those 'damned' portside and stern rockets *have* to be hitting straight before we enter the Heavyside Layer!"

Wade wiped the sweat from his forehead with a greasy right palm. He shook his head doubtfully.

"I can try," he said, "but I can't promise. For the life of me," his voice became suddenly strained from the tension he was under, "I can't see why they ever commissioned an old space scow like this in the first place. Why don't your owners give you repairs? God knows they're needed down there!"

Captain Toby put his hand on Wade's shoulder.

"And why have you signed on this packet, lad?"

Wade flushed, remembering the fact that he'd been down to his last *klekas*, and hadn't had even the offer of a berth for months until this chance presented itself.

But Captain Toby went on before he could speak.

"Exactly, lad, and that's about the

same reason for me being here. This is the first command I've had in two years. I couldn't be choosy about such things as necessary repairs. I've a wife, and two youngsters, needing food."

Wade nodded.

"I'll do my best, sir," he said shortly. He turned and started down the rusted duralloy bridge companionway.

WADE was down on the deck, and turning to enter the rocket rooms, when a glittering object, hoisted high on the rusty duralloy rail davits caught his eye. He stopped abruptly, staring.

"Well I'll be—" he muttered in amazement. His eyes suddenly narrowed. He stepped over to the rail, gazing up at the sleek, polished, gleaming sides of an exceptionally modern space lifeboat.

He pushed back his cap on his straw-colored mop of hair, shaking his head in perplexity. The super-sleek lifecraft was a tiny, streamlined, luxury space liner in itself. From the exhaust furrows on the belly of the craft, and from the very shape of the shining silver duralloy tubes that ran along the side of the ship, Wade knew that it was powered by atomic motors. Powered by atomic motors, when the *S.S. Princess* itself was so decrepit that it worked on the oldest type of rockets!

"This," Wade muttered bewilderedly, "is the most cockeyed note yet. Here our rocket tubes are ready to blow up at any moment, and every last seam on this stinking tub is likely to give from the very force of our forward motion—and then the owners of this barge have to toss all their cash around in fitting out this extra special, more than modern, space lifeboat!"

He shook his head again, still goggling in amazement at the craft. There was a cough behind him, and Wade wheeled. It was the same lackadaisical

oiler whom he'd seen as he first came aboard that morning.

The oiler touched his cap in what might have been intended as a salute.

"Nice craft, isn't she, sir?" he observed.

"Wade looked at the fellow, a huge, hulking, bald headed, flat-nosed man.

"She certainly is a trim job," he answered.

The oiler looked at him lazily, but Wade felt a certain appraising scrutiny in that glance. The flat-nosed fellow seemed to be reading his mind, for he said:

"She ain't ours, sir, if that's what you're thinking." He chuckled. "The owners of the *Princess* wouldn't spend their dough that wasteful like. "We're just carrying this life baby for a shipment delivery."

Wade nodded.

"Then why isn't this packed away down in the hold?" he demanded.

The oiler grinned. His teeth were jagged and yellow.

"There ain't enough room down there, sir. Our other cargo takes up all the hold space. So they strung this life-craft atop deck. About the only place left to carry her."

Suddenly Wade's doubts vanished. That explained it. He grinned.

"Okay, I was wondering about it, that's all. Better get below. We'll be needing all you boys pretty soon. Have to get our stern and portside rocket tubes cleared by the time we hit Heavyside."

The oiler touched his cap again.

"Yessir," he answered. Wade watched him turn away, faintly conscious of the slight tinge of derision in his eyes. Then the big fellow had disappeared down the companionway leading to the rocket rooms, and for an instant, Wade took a last look at the trim, streamlined life spaceship.

And it was while Wade took that last fleeting appraisal of the ultra modern craft, that he heard the tapping on the forward bulkhead of it. The tapping that came from the inside!

Wade froze motionless, holding his breath as he listened unbelievably. No—it couldn't be—but it was, and he heard it once more!

Rap, click, rap, click, rap, click, rap, click.

The startled bewilderment left Wade's eyes, to be replaced by sudden grim suspicion. He stepped forward, tapping three times on the outside of the sleek hull.

Rap, click, rap, click, rap, click, rap!

"I'll damned well see what *this* is all about!" Wade muttered. And he stepped forward to the lowering electrowinch that would enable him to let the craft down on its davits to a point where he could put his resolve into action. . . .

KERMIT KEITH, senior partner of the space ship cargo company of Keith, Barlowe and Mackay, sat behind a cheap glasscade desk in the main offices of said firm—located on Mars—picking his dirty teeth with the corner of an envelope.

Kermit Keith was a small scrawny fellow, with dark black hair that belied the yellow wrinkles in his neck and the crows feet beneath his beady little eyes. His hair looked as if it might have been plastered or painted atop his round skull. The tunic he wore was tailored of expensive material but lost much of its richness because of the fact that it clung to his body like a loose sheet.

At this particular moment Kermit Keith was waiting. And in the next instant the person for whom he waited stepped in through the door of his dingy office.

Kermit Keith stopped picking his teeth and looked up.

"Hello, John," he smiled. "Word come in?"

The intruder, John Barlowe, second partner in the firm, was fat red-faced and white-haired. He had a long, slim nose, and angelic blue eyes. If it weren't for the fact that he wore especially expensive tunic cloth—and much more jauntily than Keith—and carried a shining cane of Venusian snakewood, he might have looked like one of the jolly hermit monks of Saturn.

"I just got a telaboard flash," Barlowe announced in deep rich tones that sharply contrasted with his partner's squeaky speech. "The *Princess* left on schedule this morning. Everything's fine. Just dandy. We'll be plenty rich inside of another month, Kermit m'boy. Plenty rich!"

"And the insurance papers; you checked through those very carefully, John?" Keith squeaked.

"With a fine toothed comb, m'boy. There's no way the company can wriggle out of the terms we made with them. A very clever bit of wording took care of that." Barlowe beamed. He rubbed his red hands.

"Smart deal, signing on that poverty stricken young first rocketeer," Keith falsettoed in compliment. "He seems to have been able to stir the hulk of the *Princess* into motion. Couldn't collect our insurance, you know, if we weren't able to get her out into space."

Barlowe chortled.

"We ought to give him a commission on the deal."

Keith smirked, then squeaked.

"I don't think he'll be back to collect it. Or the drunken old ass, Captain Toby, for that matter." He giggled. "It was a riot. He's been grounded here on Mars for damned near two years. No berths open for a

guzzler as old as he is. He just about snapped my hand off when I offered him the command of the *S.S. Princess*. Didn't even ask what his pay for the run was to be. He figures he'll be able to get back to his wife and brats on Earth, and maybe get a permanent assignment with our line if he brings the *Princess* through on the schedule we gave him."

Barlowe smiled, and pulled a thick Venusian cigar from the breast pocket of his expensive tunic. He lighted it reflectively, then added:

"Most of the rest of the crew acted the same way. They were all wharf rats pathetically eager to get any kind of berths on any kind of space-going rat traps."

KENNETH KEITH permitted himself a last giggle at this, then became silkily serious.

"What about Mackay, John? He's all set to sign over, isn't he?"

Barlowe nodded. "Glad to get out of the firm. He'll sign over for practically nothing. And in so doing, the ass will lose himself a fortune."

"He's rich anyway," Keith squeaked. "If it weren't for his childish desire to play spacefaring financier, he'd never have put a *kleka* in with us. As it was, he didn't bother us any, thank God, and only showed up when we needed more capital."

Barlowe nodded.

"He had his radium interests to keep him plenty busy," he acknowledged.

"They're still big enough to keep him from indulging in his frustrated desire to sit at a desk and order space ships around the void like a master navigator."

"Thank heavens," Keith observed. "Otherwise he'd have caught on to our profit and loss system long ago."

Barlowe chuckled again, his angelic blue eyes twinkling.

"That old profit and loss system, Kermit m'boy, will be planetary peanuts compared to this deal we've got now."

"Have Stover, Quanes, and Janess got their orders straight?" Keith changed tack abruptly. "Do they know what to do, and when to do it?"

Barlowe looked hurt.

"Why, Kermit, I personally gave them each their instructions. Stover is to see to it that the young first rocketeer doesn't embarrass the plans by turning genius and nursing the *Princess* through the entire voyage."

Keith frowned, as if trying to remember.

"Stover was the huge, hulking, flat-nosed pug ugly you signed on as oiler?"

Barlowe nodded.

"The one with the sleepy eyes. He's a good man for what we'll need." Barlowe took a satisfied puff from his Venusian cigar and continued, "Quanes is signed on as quartermaster. He'll make damned certain that no one does any probing around below the hold to see what cargo's being carried. And when the time comes, he'll touch off that cargo in a blast that'll send every asteroid south of Saturn skirting every which way."

"And what about Janess?" Keith demanded.

"He's signed on as second officer. That's just as a final precaution. Old Captain Toby might get too conscientious about wanting to bring the *Princess* all the way to Earth. It'll be while Janess is on the bridge and in command that our fireworks start. Besides, he's an expert navigator, and he'll be the one to pilot the new lifecraft when the three of them abandon the ship," Barlowe explained with the smug satisfaction of an executive who has taken

care of every last minor detail.

"Splendid," Keith's falsetto squeaked admiringly, "we're all set then. There's nothing that can block our pla—"

BARLOWE, by a fit of extraordinarily loud coughing, cut off his scrawny partner's sentence completely. And as he coughed he jabbed a warning finger in the direction of the door. Then, loudly, he said:

"Say, Kermit, was there someone knocking? Why, I'll bet it's Mackay. He's arrived ahead of time!" As he spoke he moved to the door and opened it swiftly to reveal a short, stocky, gray-moustached, jauntily-tailored gentleman, just in the process of raising his hand to the door to knock.

Barlowe seized the stocky newcomer by the hand, booming a hearty greeting as he did so.

"Well, well, Mackay. Glad to see you, old man. Glad to see you!"

The short, stocky, gray-moustached newcomer—who was, in line, the third partner in the space cargo firm—gave Barlowe a sharp glance, and after a minute took his hand from the other's hearty grasp.

Kermit Keith was on his feet, beaming.

"Well, well, Peter Mackay. It's a pleasure to see you, Peter. We were afraid that you wouldn't have time to get down here from your radium interests to—"

Peter Mackay cut him off briskly.

"Really wouldn't have had time ordinarily. But that madcap daughter of mine is off on another one of her vanishing acts, and her wanderings led to somewhere in this vicinity. So I thought I'd kill two birds with one stone. I can take care of you gentlemen, then. I can find Joy and bring her back home by the scruff of her beautiful young neck."

Barlowe laughed mechanically.

"Well, that's a relief, Peter. I was sure from the look on your face that you were worried about something. And for an awful minute I thought you might have reconsidered our offer, or at least have been dubious about it."

Peter Mackay looked up sharply.

"Why should I reconsider it? It seems fair enough, and I've had my lawyers look at the papers. They've been wanting me to give up this enterprise for some time anyway."

Kermit Keith joined Barlowe in jovial laughter. Laughter intended to indicate to Peter Mackay that they were only kidding about even the remote possibility of his not accepting their offer.

"Have you got the papers?" Peter Mackay demanded. "I'm in a great hurry, you know."

Kermit Keith reached down into a desk drawer, and with lightning speed whipped a sheaf of forms out onto the desk.

"Right here," he squeaked, "right here, Peter. We've got them all ready for you to sign."

Two minutes later, Peter Mackay looked up, and set his pen down on the desk.

"There you are, gentlemen. You've bought out my interest in the firm. Frankly, although there's never been a great deal of profit in it for me, it's been lots of fun. However," he sighed, "my other interests kept me from giving any of my time to this, so I suppose it's just as well."

"We've enjoyed the prestige of your name, and your friendship, Peter," Kermit Keith piped.

"You bet, old boy," boomed Barlowe, grabbing Mackay's hand and pumping it.

"Well, gentlemen, I must rush off. I've got to find that harebrained daughter of mine and take her back home.

You understand, I hope?" Peter Mackay said. He had moved to the door.

"Certainly, Peter," Barlowe agreed. "And we'll forward your draft to your lawyers in the morning. Goodbye!"

"Goodbye," squeaked Keith.

Peter Mackay nodded, and stepped out of the door. Barlowe and Keith watched him leave, then—with simultaneously ear splitting grins—they turned to each other and shook hands triumphantly. . . .

III

OLD Captain Toby tumbled his fat bulk down the bridge ladder two rungs at a time. Then, breathlessly, but not pausing, he turned and moved up the deck to his cabin. Puffing heavily, he threw open the door and stepped inside the dingy room.

Tommy Wade stood there in the middle of the cabin, facing him. His lean young face was gravely troubled.

"You wanted me?" Captain Toby asked. "Your message said you wanted to see me in privacy, down here."

Wade nodded.

"Right, sir. We've a new problem on our hands."

"Not another rocket breakdown?" Captain Toby groaned.

Wade shook his head.

"No, not that. I've discovered a stowaway on board the *Princess*."

"What?" the old captain was properly astonished. "Where is he?" he spluttered. "Where did you find him?"

"It isn't a he," Wade said. "It's a her. And I found her hiding in the streamlined space lifeship we're carrying as deck cargo. She'd been hiding in there, and if I hadn't gotten her out in time, she'd probably have suffocated."

Captain Toby's astonishment gave

way to incredulity. "Where is she?" he began. "I'll—"

"Here I am, Captain," a cool, liquid, feminine voice broke in.

The old captain wheeled, his eyes going to the corner of the room where a red tuniced girl had been standing unnoticed during the preliminaries of their conversation. She was, Toby saw in a glance, a young and very pretty girl. Her hair was blond, and hung down to her shoulders like a halo. Her eyes were green and lively, and her smile—which she was now using with her utmost endeavor to charm—was as white as starshine.

"Well—" the old man choked. "Uhmph, hah, er—"

"I hope you'll let me explain, Captain," the girl pleaded smilingly.

"I was going to throw her in the brig, sir," Wade began, cheeks reddening. "But, well, you can't do that to a—"

"To a pretty young girl," Captain Toby finished for him. "No, you really can't, Mister."

"I meant 'to a woman'," Wade protested, the color in his cheeks climbing. "You can't throw a woman in the brig."

THE old captain had regained most of his composure, and was gazing at the girl in a fashion that was far from disapproving. He turned to Wade, then.

"I'll agree with you, Mister, this is a problem we're having on our hands here."

"I'll pay for my passage when we reach Earth," the girl broke in earnestly. "Don't take me back."

Captain Toby looked at her.

"There'll be no turning back now, Lassie. You can be sure of that. We've done wonders to push this space scow this far, without turning back. Yes, you'll have to come along with us. It wouldn't be right to throw you over

the side. Now, what would your name be?"

"She refused to tell me," Wade broke in angrily. "And to be frank about it, she fought like a tigress when I pulled her out of her hiding place."

The old captain's eyes twinkled.

"Is that right?" he asked the girl.

"He was nasty, and overbearing. I bit him on the finger," the girl flared. Her green eyes were flashing.

"If we're going to permit you to carry along as passenger," the old man said, "I think it only fair, now, that you give us your name and an explanation for your being here. Don't you agree, Miss?"

The girl hesitated. She glared at Wade for an instant.

"I'd never have told that roughneck," she said. "But you're a gentleman, Captain. If you give me your solemn promise not to telaflash a word about me, either to Mars or Earth, I'll tell you everything."

"She might be a criminal," Wade broke in angrily. "There's no need for us to make such a promise." He was still thinking of the finger she had bitten in their scuffle.

"No," Captain Toby disagreed, "she's not the criminal type to my mind. I think we've naught to lose through such a promise."

Wade reddened further under the amused contemplation of the old captain. He lapsed into a surly silence.

The girl brightened.

"Thank you, Captain." She paused, then went on. "It's not a very long story. You see, I've been brought up in surroundings which have always irritated me. Dull, stodgy, stuffy surroundings. My father is a very wealthy man. He tried to give me everything, of course, but never realized that he was depriving me of real happiness by confining me to the narrow life I had to

live as a girl of a wealthy family."

"Well put, lassie," Captain Toby applauded. "You've common sense there."

The girl smiled charmingly, then went on. "All my life has been spent in a constant struggle with my father—who is a fine man, but misunderstanding about many things—to live the way I want to live. I wanted romance, glamor, adventure, excitement. But he was against it all. He had the idea that sending me all over the interplanetary chain on luxury line cruises, was giving me adventure, or excitement. I got quite fed up with it all. I was, ah, er—"

"Bored?" Wade spoke for the first time, and sarcastically.

The girl looked disdainful.

"Yes, bored. I was utterly bored. So I finally decided to set out on my own, stow away on a tramp space ship, see life and excitement and adventure as it really is."

The captain nodded solemnly.

"And that's your reason for being here, is it?"

The girl smiled.

"Yes, that's it exactly."

Old Captain Toby shook his head.

"I see. It sounds like an honest reason. Now, tell us your name, won't you?"

The girl hesitated for but an instant, then she said:

"Remember your promise?"

Captain Toby nodded.

"I do that. Go ahead, lassie, you're free to speak. I'll not telaflash your father, nor anyone else, till we reach Earth."

"My name," the girl blurted suddenly, "is Joy Mackay."

Captain Toby's red cheeks went suddenly sallow.

"And what would be your father's name?" he demanded chokingly.

"Peter Mackay."

Toby turned to Wade.

"And that would be the Peter Mackay of the firm which owns the *Princess*—the firm of Keith, Barlowe, and Mackay!"

"And this, this, this is his daughter?" Wade demanded flabbergasted.

Joy Mackay looked levelly at Wade and nodded, her smile acidly triumphant.

IV

SECOND OFFICER JANESE, of the *S.S. Princess*, shifted himself to a more comfortable position on his cabin bunk and filled his own glass and that of his visitor's from the bottle he held in his hand.

The visitor for whom second officer Janess was pouring such liberal portions of Venusian whisky, was a huge, hulking, bald-headed, flat-nosed oiler named Stover. Stover had sleepy eyes, but they were more than usually alert now as second officer Janess talked to him.

"The very fact that Wade was able to fix those portside and stern rockets and get this tub through Heaviside without trouble, is enough to show us that he'll need careful watching, Stover," second officer Janess was saying. Janess was a tall, gaunt, unsmiling fellow with a frogbelly complexion and lank, uncombed black hair.

"I'm on the ball," Stover assured him. "It'll be easy."

Second officer Janess downed his drink in a gulp.

"It had better be easy," he remarked, "and slick." He reached for the bottle to punctuate his remark by filling another hooker. "There's plenty of cash tied up in this deal, in case you might have forgotten. And there's a neat percentage in it for us if we carry off our

part."

Oiler Stover's sleepy eyes glimmered greedily.

"This old hulk is insured to the hilt, eh?"

"Better than that," Janess answered. "She is overinsured. The owners faked a cargo value of three hundred thousand *zennas*. So this tub is worth all that—from the insurance company."

Stover shook his head and whistled admiringly through his ragged front teeth.

"Wow—three hundred thousand!" Suddenly his eyes narrowed. "But how did they get around the insurance inspection of the cargo?"

"Changed cargoes after inspection," Janess grinned. "And a slick job of it, too."

"But the insurance company must have seen the rotten condition of this old tub," Stover protested. "How'd they ever pass it?"

"Trick wording in the clauses. Barlowe and Keith aren't dummies. They had their lawyers draw up special papers—stating that any accident due to the condition of the ship is noncollectable. It's just insured against natural perils."

"But that was cutting their own throats," Stover frowned. "What else?"

"That," explained Janess patiently, "was the only way they could get the insurance. But that extra clause—a lot of whereas and whereof stuff—invalidates the first clause. So in reality, the insurance monkeys are liable for the loss of the ship and the cargo in a blanket valuation, *even if* the cargo's lost due to the instability and unspace-worthiness of the *Princess*!"

"Whew," Stover whistled through his jagged front teeth again, "what a sucker insurance company!"

Second officer Janess shook his head.

"No," he disagreed. "It's not a dumb insurance outfit, it's the smart shysters Keith and Barlowe got to write up their end of the clause."

Stover reached over to the bottle and poured himself a drink. He smiled then.

"Okay, have it your way. Here's to the smart shysters, and to Barlowe and Keith!"

Second officer Janess raised his glass.

"And to tomorrow night, when we go into our part of the bargain."

As they clinked their glasses together, there was a knock on the cabin door.

"Come in," Janess shouted.

THE door opened, and a tall, smiling redheaded young man stepped into the room. He was sparse framed, and very thin. His long sharp nose predominated the rest of his features.

"You're late, Quanes," Janess said.

Quartermaster Quanes closed the door behind him, still smiling.

"Of course I am," he answered. "I was busy down in the hold, getting those electro caps attached to the last of our precious cargo."

"Well," Janess grunted. "As long as you weren't trying to look up that stowaway Mackay girl, okay. Stay away from her. She's Peter Mackay's daughter, don't forget. And even though her old man doesn't know she's aboard the *Princess*, the girl is in plenty close with old Captain Toby and young Wade, by now."

"I didn't know about the last," Quanes said. "Fast worker, this Wade. I understood that they weren't too fond of each other when he first found her hiding in the space lifeship."

"If I didn't know you better," Janess said warningly, "I'd say you sounded jealous. Stay away from the women, Quanes," he concluded "at least

on this job."

Quanes sat down beside Janess and poured himself a drink into the glass Stover had just drained.

"Don't worry. I was just thinking that she's a looker, and might make pleasant company for me when we leave this old tub to blow to hell and go to that asteroid hideout until things clear up."

"That's all we'd need," Stover said disgustedly. "What would we do after that, kill her?"

"She'll die with the rest of 'em, when we blow the works up tomorrow night," Quanes observed matter-of-factly. "What's the difference?"

"Forget those ideas!" second officer Janess snapped in sudden irritation. "We don't want any wenches cluttering this thing up. As it is, everything will be smooth. The *Princess* will blow from here to Saturn, and we'll be on our way to an asteroid hideout. Let it go at that, and stop thinking about who dies and why."

"Don't get nervous," Stover said to Janess.

"Who's nervous?"

"You are," Stover retorted. "Calm down. Everything's set."

"It better be," Janess muttered. "There's a lot riding on it, and if we mess it up, there'll be a mass murder charge against us."

Quanes broke in. He was still smiling. He fingered his long sharp nose. "Never mind the jitters. Do as Stover says. Calm down."

"See that you don't forget your instructions," second officer Janess flared irritably, "and leave the rest to me."

"I'm pat on mine," Quanes smiled. "I touch off the fuses on the electro caps a little after eight bells. We'll be safely off from the tub by then."

"And I smash the rocket gauges, plus a few tubes, promptly at eight bells,"

Stover put in.

"Don't forget the navigation apparatus, also," Janess snapped.

"No worry about that," Stover retorted. "Just do what you're supposed to do, and I'll do what I have to."

"I'll take over the bridge during that time, don't worry," Janess said. "Even if I have to kill the Old Man."

"See that you don't get yourself plugged," Quanes added. "You're the only bright boy who knows enough navigation to handle that streamlined space lifeship. We'd be in a hell of a mess if you botched your part."

"Let's stop this damned wrangling," Janess said suddenly, mouth taut. "We might as well drink to tomorrow night—at eight bells!"

Silently, the three raised their glasses . . .

V

FIRST ROCKETEER TOMMY WADE stood proudly by the port-side tubes in the rocket room of the *S.S. Princess* the following evening. It was a little after seven bells. Sweat and oil and grime coated his handsome young features, but for the first time in months, there was a glint of pleased satisfaction in his eyes.

The tremendous task Wade had faced in turning the ancient rockets of this wretched hulk into workable machines had miraculously been accomplished. It had meant endless hours without sleep, constant, ceaseless toil—and the devil's own brand of ingenuity and genius. But he had done it, and at the rate his miraculous job of nursing was progressing, the *S.S. Princess* might yet stagger into Earth port on schedule.

All of which, considering that the *Princess* had once had little likelihood of ever reaching port at all, was nothing

short of incredible. And now, as Wade tinkered with a treacherous valve handle, he even whistled a little. For there was another reason for his exuberance—an additional one.

Joy Mackay, the blond, green-eyed stowaway—in spite of the fact that her father was a partner in the firm that permitted this wreck of a space tramp to take to the lanes—knew a little something about motors and rockets. And it had been through this knowledge that the first mutual dislike between Wade and the girl had flared into a technical argument, and then cooled off into a newborn respect for one another.

Any girl, Wade felt, who knew as much about rockets as Joy did couldn't be wrong. And any young first rocketeer who could perform miracles in his trade before a young lady who could understand those miracles, deserved the wholehearted respect of that young lady. At least if that young lady happened to be Joy Mackay.

And in four days the mutual dislike had blossomed into something that was dangerously approaching the fringes of romance.

At the moment, Wade had forgotten that he was half an hour overdue for his date on deck with Joy Mackay. There had been a slight rocket count discrepancy which Wade began to check, and this had lured him further and further into his work until at last he stood as he did now, an electra stinson in his hand, and an utterly absorbed glare in his eyes.

Now Wade tinkered on. Time moved irrevocably forward. And a lovely green-eyed blonde grew more and more angry as she stamped up and down the deck of the *Princess*.

The rocket rooms, with the exception of Wade, were deserted. So intent was Tommy Wade, that he wasn't conscious of eight bells striking throughout the

ship some minutes later. And neither was he conscious of the hulking figure that slid from behind a duralloy bulkhead, stepped up two feet in back of him, and brought a thick blunt object smashing down upon his skull.

And with the blow, Wade slid slowly to the floor, blood puddling around his head, now conscious of nothing whatever.

Oiler Stover looked down at Wade, kicked him once with a heavy space boot. Then he grunted in satisfaction, and stepped up to the rocket valve gauges. With the same thick, blunt object, Stover smashed in the valve gauges, knocked off a few piston arms protruding from the portside and stern tubes, and otherwise played hell with the life and guts of the *S.S. Princess*.

Standing back, breathing heavily, Oiler Stover surveyed his job smugly. The portside and stern rockets were already missing count. In another ten minutes they'd stop all together . . .

OLD CAPTAIN TOBY hadn't left his bridge at eight bells. So that necessitated the use of an atomic pistol—skillfully used, butt end, in the hands of second officer Janess—on the back of his round old skull. Captain Toby slumped deckward with a heavy sigh, just like a man going to sleep. Minutes later, Janess had successfully smashed all the navigating instruments of the *Princess* . . .

And also at eight bells, quartermaster Quanes inserted his keys into the lock of the cargo hold bulkheads, slipped inside the darkened quarters, and went to work setting the time mechanism on the fuses he'd inserted over the ends of many highly explosive sticks of *explotomic*. He carried a small round gadget in his hand. The small round gadget had a time device on it similar to the devices on the ends of the fuses

he'd fixed to the *explotomic* sticks.

Quartermaster Quanes had to smile as he fixed all the time devices to correspond to the interval set on the gadget in his hand. It would be simple. Toby and Wade would be out for at least another hour; the remainder of the crew, stupid Venusian louts, he'd gotten thoroughly drunk—and when he pressed the button on the gadget in his hand, he and Janess and Stover would be a half-hour distance from the S.S. *Princess* which would promptly blow up with a bang.

And Quanes had one more reason to smile. Janess had taken the precaution to lock the girl, Joy Mackay, in her stateroom. But he, Quanes, had unlocked the door before the girl had realized what had been done. Now she would probably be up on deck waiting for Wade's nightly stroll. But she'd get more than she bargained for. Quane had every delightful intention in the world of carrying Joy Mackay off with them when they took to the space lifeship. What the hell, you could always get rid of her later. Two months hideout on that asteroid would be made much more pleasant by her company. . . .

PROMPTLY at ten minutes after eight bells had struck, second officer Janess, Oliver Stover, and quartermaster Quanes met at their appointed spot on the deck of the S.S. *Princess*. The appointed spot was beneath the davit-hung streamlined space lifeship.

"All set?" asked Janess. He was breathing hard.

Stover nodded.

"Just like I promised. I worked it smooth."

Quanes was looking sharply, impatiently, up and down the deck.

Janess lashed at him with a question.

"Well, Quanes? What about it?

Your part taken care of?"

Quanes seemed startled.

"Yeah, sure. It's all set, but—"

"But what?" Janess snapped out the words edgily.

"But Joy isn't on the deck here. She usually meets Wade here at this time."

Second officer Janess snarled angrily.

"Why you simpleton, I locked her in her stateroom. Don't you remember? She's okay, won't be able to break out in time. Come on. Let's get going!"

Quanes was slightly pale around the gills.

"I, uh," he faltered, "I, eh, er, let her out. I unlocked the door before she knew you'd locked her in. I figured she'd be up here, at this spot, waiting for Wade. Then I could have—"

"Could have taken her along?" Janess almost screamed the words in his sudden blazing fury. "Why you blithering ass, you moronic nincompoop—I told you, I warned you, I—" he broke off spluttering.

Stover looked at Quanes with angry, heavy-lidded eyes.

"You damned sap," he grated. He whipped an atomic pistol from his holster. "We should burn your bowels out right here and now!"

Quanes turned ashen, now.

"Look," he pleaded, "don't. She can't do any harm wandering around. They'll never discover the *explotomic* sticks in the cargo, even if she does bring the captain or Wade around!" He spluttered on. "Don't burn me, please, for God's sakes. I thought it was a good idea!"

Janess grabbed Stover's arm, pushed it down.

"We'll decide on that later," he said. "Let him alone for now." He turned to the rail davits from which the space lifecraft was hung. "Let's lower this, and in a hurry!"

The winches creaked, and slowly the

beautiful streamlined craft was lowered to an even edge with the deck. Janess reached over and pulled back the seven foot hatch cowling along the top of the craft. It moved noiselessly.

"Pile in," Janess ordered. "Plenty of room in the rear. I'll take the controls. This little baby is a juiced-up power job, thank heavens!"

The three tumbled into the craft. Janess said over his shoulder to Stover,

"Get ready to cut those davits loose, the minute I choke up on these atomic motors!" He bent down to flash the vizaglow over the complicated instrument panel.

Moments passed.

"Hurry up!" Stover snapped.

"There isn't a lot of time," Quanes reminded.

Janess looked back over his shoulder. Sweat was trickling down his forehead. "I've been gunning the damned things for five minutes," he protested bewilderedly. "Something's haywire!"

Another three minutes passed. Stover was cursing softly in the back of the ship. Janess was soaked with sweat, and his tunic hung to him as if immersed in water. He looked back over his shoulder appealingly.

"Well?" Stover demanded.

"I'm no rocketeer," Janess protested. "I can't take 'em apart and put them together again!"

"Did you look this over this afternoon?" Stover snarled.

"Swear to Saturn!" Janess looked back again. His face was frightened, now. Desperately, he bent once more over the instrument panel. His hands worked frantically. More minutes flew by. At last he looked up and over his shoulder again. His voice was choked, almost on the verge of hysteria. "I can't do a thing. It's no use!"

Quanes was holding the time device gadget in his hand.

"I've set this thing," his voice trembled. "We're done for if we stick around here!"

"Get down there," Stover snarled suddenly, "and remove those caps on the fuses. It's the only way."

Stumblingly, shakily, frantically, Quanes climbed out of the space life-craft and jumped from the rail to the deck. He straightened up—and looked into the muzzle of an atomic rifle!

FIRST rocketeer Tommy Wade, still a trifle unsteady, and with a head quite a little bit bloody, was snarling very unpleasantly behind the stock of that rifle!

"Get the hell up with your hands, Quanes!" he snarled.

Quanes got the hell up with his hands.

Joy Mackay, who was standing beside Tommy Wade, green eyes blazing like twin fires from hell, was also holding an atomic rifle. She looked contemptuously at Quanes.

"Saboteur!" she spat.

Quanes paled, then, suddenly, he yowled.

"Janess, Stover, watch yourselves!"

Joy Mackay clouted Quanes on the side of the head with her rifle butt. He whimpered once as he sprawled face forward and unconscious to the deck.

Second officer Janess stuck his head out of the hatch of the space lifeship, blinking quizzically. Wade was there to bring the blunt end of his atomic rifle crashing down on the fellow's unprotected skull.

Oiler Stover came up and out of the space lifeship shooting. But his aim was wild, and just a preliminary to give him a chance to emerge. Wade, as Stover figured he would, wasted precious seconds in forcing the unwilling Joy Mackay back into the shelter of a bulkhead. Then Wade turned to face

Stover.

Stover fired as Wade wheeled. The shot tore into the fleshy part of Wade's thigh, but he forced a grin to keep the other from knowing he'd hit him. Then Wade fired, carefully and coolly, as two shots from Stover's atomic pistol burned the duralloy armor of the bulkhead behind his ear.

Stover staggered back. Wade's shot had caught him in the shoulder. Wade's second shot was better. Stover pitched over dead, an ugly blue burn—the size of a *kleka*—in the center of his forehead!

Joy Mackay stepped out from behind the bulkhead.

"Tommy," she sighed. "You'll have to teach me how to shoot that well."

Wade grinned. This was the type of wife to have. He suddenly decided to see what he could do about the having.

"I guess I did all right on the atomic motors in the life spaceship, eh darling?" Joy said proudly.

"Beyond repair?" Wade asked.

"Not for *you*," the girl answered.

Wade grinned again. "You're a clever little mechanic, Joy, and a very tough one."

Joy Mackay sighed.

"Oh, Lord. I always forget to be feminine at the proper moments. Why do I always forget to turn on my girlish wiles?" She smiled sweetly.

Wade looked at her.

"What do you think you're doing now?" he asked.

Quanes suddenly groaned at their feet. Wade looked down. The fellow had a small, glittering gadget in his hand. Wade bent over and picked it up. Suddenly he gasped, face ashen. Like a wild man, he turned and bolted away from Joy, over to the cargo hatches. In an instant, he pried one open and disappeared below the deck.

Below, Wade worked like a dervish.

He flew from case to case, tearing cap after cap from the explotomic sticks in them. Finally, as he went over the hold for the fourth time without finding any more, he sighed deeply. The menace of an immediate explosion was gone. Wade leaned against the case and mopped his face. He wished he was as cool as Joy more than likely was at the moment. And thinking of Joy once more, Wade remembered what he had resolved to do in the matter of a wife. He started back to the deck . . .

BUT when Wade faced Joy again on deck, the grin was gone from his face, and an entirely different expression was there: Maybe it was the last strain, the shock of the potential explosion, that suddenly jarred the punch drunk goofy glow from his brain. For it could only have been a punch drunk glow that would have allowed him to forget two disastrous items of grim reality in the after flush of his coup against Stover, Janess, and Quanes.

Quickly, and without trimmings, Wade explained their predicament to Joy.

"We'd been chumps enough to forget that we're now stranded helplessly out here in space," he said. "The instruments, the rockets, everything to enable us to find our way back to Mars or ahead to Earth has been thoroughly smashed. Undoubtedly we've already drifted off our course, and we'll drift farther and farther, through the timeless reaches of the void. We might very well never be found again!"

"But, Tommy," the girl protested, "there's the telaflash system."

"That's been smashed too. They thought of everything."

"Nice work, youngster!"

Tommy Wade wheeled at the new voice. Wheeled, and faced Captain Toby, white-faced, head wrapped in a

thick towel, and leaning against a bulkhead rail for support. Wade leaped to the old man's side.

"You all right, Captain?"

"Think I'll manage," Toby said a little thickly. "I'm still a little dizzy from that bang they maneuvered."

Wade helped him to a deck casing, where he sat down while Joy expertly unwrapped the towel from his battered head, and readjusted it for more comfort and cleanliness. Wade explained the situation from what he had seen of it.

"We could be in a rottener mess, lad," Captain Toby said when Wade had finished, "but to do so would be quite a trick." He shook his head dispondently. "I see it all too clearly, and much too late. The dirty devils as are our owners must have cooked this up. Just before I staggered down here, after coming to, I pawed through the ships' papers more thoroughly than a captain generally does. I paid especial note to the duplicate insurance papers, which I'd never bothered to give particular heed to till now."

"Well," Wade demanded. "What did you find?"

"This vessel is insured for three hundred thousand *zennas*!"

Wade gasped. Joy opened her mouth in disbelief.

"No," Wade protested, "that's impossible."

"It was a slick, dirty deal that I've no time to explain now," Captain Toby said. "But the facts are that the three murdering skunks who tried to ruin us—and have just about succeeded—are stooges of the owners, Keith, Barlowe, and Mackay, who wanted the *Princess* to blow up in space so they'd pick up a fortune from the insurance."

"I don't believe it!" It was Joy Mackay who stepped forward, cheeks crimson, green eyes blazing. "My

father would never be a party to such a deal. The money doesn't mean a thing to him, he's got more than he could ever use. There'd be no reason for him to risk his reputation by such an underhanded scheme!"

WADE put his hand on the girl's shoulder.

"Take it easy," he said. "We don't think your dad is involved in this, Joy. But it's a cinch one or both of his partners are."

Joy was still hotly indignant.

"I'll prove it," she stormed. "I'll get him right now on the telaflash and find out."

"Calm a bit, Joy," Captain Toby advised. "There's no telaflash left in commission. We believe you, lass!"

"But there *is* a telaflash," Joy insisted, "in the little space lifeship. I saw it when I was inside putting the atomic motors on the blink."

Tommy Wade let out a yell of wild joy.

"Then we're on our way!" he shouted. "If there's that telaflash, and I recall now there is, we're all set. About a hundred million super ideas have just occurred to me. All of them are wows, listen!" And he drew Joy aside, whispering fiercely in her ear.

"You have your dad arrange that, will you?" he asked her, "and if needs be, he can telaflash an answer."

Joy nodded excitedly, and turned to rush to the streamlined little space lifeship.

Captain Toby was thoroughly bewildered.

"What's this all about, lad? Have you lost your mind?"

"No, Captain," Wade shouted happily. "I've just found it again. I'm going to repair those atomic motors and get us back to Mars!"

"Can you do it?" Toby asked, hope

dawning in his eyes.

"You bet. And that little ship has the power to do something else. Something else that's going to put us on easy street!"

"Wade, Wade," Joy came running back a few minutes later, "the telaflash worked. I got father. I was right. He knew nothing of it. He'd been bought out by Barlowe and Keith only a few days ago. He's going to do what you say. He'll have everything set when we get back to Mars!"

Wade grinned, pulling off his tunic jacket and rolling up his sleeves. "Now to get to work on a motor," he grunted.

THE shipping offices of the space cargo firm of Keith and Barlowe were crowded some four days later. Crowded by the presence of an old grizzled space captain, a young first rocketeer, a stocky, moustached gentleman named Peter Mackay, and said gentleman's daughter Joy.

Mackay was speaking, and his words lashed at Barlowe and Keith, both of whom sat in chairs behind the cheap, large desk in the center of the room.

"So you're stuck," Peter Mackay asserted. "You're caught with the goods, both of you. Young Wade *towed* the S.S. *Princess* into port by means of the small space lifeship. And that towing, you two crooks, means salvage. Salvage according to the strict laws of space rulings. Young Wade is entitled to a salvage fee from you of exactly the *insured value* of the S.S. *Princess* — three hundred thousand!"

"But—" Keith squeaked strickenly.

"It's sheer banditry!" Barlowe boomed. "Why, why—"

"It's the law," Peter Mackay cut in.

"But paying three hundred thousand would break us—" Keith bleated. "We've hardly that much including our business!"

"Turn over every last rightful cent," said Peter Mackay in the squarejawed manner that had made him millions, "including the business. Otherwise we'll throw you to the jaws of the law. Take your choice. I had my lawyers draw up young Wade's claims. I've the papers here. Sign them or else I'll call enforcement officers!"

Barlowe bit into his underlip. His voice shook as he spoke to his partner.

"All right. They've got us. We might as well, Kermit."

Wade, Captain Toby, Joy, and Peter Mackay grinned in simultaneously satisfied triumph. Barlowe and Keith took the papers and signed.

Wade turned to Joy.

"Think you can marry me in spite of your father's millions?" he asked.

Joy grinned like an elf.

"You are now the prosperous owner of a second rate line which—I am positive—you will some day build into a super-super service. That should satisfy my greed, plus the cash you're getting from Barlowe and Keith."

Wade, with one arm around Joy's slim waist, turned to captain Toby.

"And you've got a berth on my line, Captain, from now on in."

It was the old captain's turn to grin. Peter Mackay spoke up.

"I've only just met you, Wade. But that doesn't make any difference to Joy. I can never change her mind once it's made up. And this time it is. However, for once I agree with her."

Wade reddened beneath his space bronze in becoming modesty. Then he turned to Keith and Barlowe who looked sickly on.

"Get out of my office, both of you," he ordered, "while I kiss my future wife!"

They got, quickly. But as for Captain Toby and Peter Mackay, they looked on shamelessly—admiringly . . .